

Religious Vulgarities

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Pittsburgh

January 18, 1914

Wright Publishing Co., 5938-40 Kirkwood St.

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“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue and if there be any praise, think on these things.” Phil. 4:8.

I have spoken (1) of social vulgarity, (2) of intellectual vulgarity, lastly I want to speak of religious vulgarity. That is the worst of all. Here, too, I mean low ideals of religion, the lowering of sacred things to common levels, the degradation of religion by irreverence. Reverence is the soul of religion, and religion cannot exist without it. Faith is founded on reverence, worship is the expression of reverence, prayer and praise the utterance of reverence. When reverence ceases religion dies. The third commandment, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain,” is a command against irreverence, for irreverence is profanity.

In some of the methods of the Salvation Army we have an illustration of this irreverence. Of the earnestness, sincerity, devotion of those who are at

the head of the organization, and the great body of its workers, I have only words of sympathy and admiration. I cannot say the same of some of its methods. The beating of badly strung drums, the blowing of instruments generally out of tune, the shaking of tambourines by dancing women, is out of keeping with the dignity, the solemnity, the grandeur of the religion of Christ; but these things are of small importance compared with the irreverence and vulgarity of their advertisements.

“A ham-sandwich Hallelujah tea at 6 p. m., kneedrill at 7:30, and the Descent of the Holy Ghost at 8.”

The following is an advertisement which was reported in “The Standard,” sent by the Vicar of Harwich, whose parish was placarded with the announcements:

“Salvation Army, Harwich, Public Hall, Sunday next, Nov. 30—Captain Tom Payne, assisted by Lieutenant W. Whitley, and the Hallelujah Poet, and others, will fight the devil. Subjects for the day: 11:0 a. m.—Lessons from a Preacher who came from Hell. 3:0 p. m.—Popping the Question, and a few hints to young ladies. 6:0 p. m.—Fearful Battle, Tom Payne will fight the Devil on the platform with cords and cutrope. N. B.—Carriages may be ordered by :0 p. m.”

I have seen in England, “Why pay five pence for mutton when you can have the Lamb of God for nothing?”

The Gospel of Christ does not need such help as this. It is not helped, but hindered, in its free course by such irreverence. The power for good of the Salvation Army, and I believe it is a power for good, is in its self-sacrifice. Many of its members live among the poor, live as the poor live, yet show that through the religion of Christ they can live pure, cheerful, happy lives under the hardest conditions. That is the power of the Salvation Army. I knew a girl in New York, the daughter of one of the most influential bankers of the city, who left her beautiful home and all the comforts of a luxurious life, to be a member of the Salvation Army and died in its service. If I had seen that girl shaking a tambourine on the street corner, it would have been sweeter music to me than that of our choir, for it would have been the music of pure self sacrifice. That, and not its irreverence, it is the power of the Salvation Army.

In our city at the present time we are trying the experiment of Salvation Army methods without its self sacrifice, its irreverence without its life among the poor. Of the leader of this work I desire to speak with all due respect. He is a man of gifts, an orator, an actor, a man of personal force, magnetism, great physical endurance, of his earnestness and sincerity, so far as one can judge, there is no doubt. Some good, much good I hope, will be done,

many rescued whom the Church does not reach, many set free from the bondage of intemperance, and I do not underestimate the great importance of this; but the question in my mind is whether the permanent result on the life of the community will be an increased respect for religion and the Church, and that is of even greater and more vital importance. He has fallen into the mistake of the Salvation Army in thinking that religion to help the man in the street must be brought down to the level of the man in the street. If the man in the street is vulgar, religion must be vulgar; if he is irreverent, religion must be irreverent; if he is slangy, religion must be slangy; if he likes the sensational, the spectacular, the theatrical, religion must be sensational, spectacular, theatrical. If he prefers the vaudeville to the church, vaudeville methods must be introduced into the church. But the object of religion is to lift men up, and it can only do this from above. Religion must indeed reach down to the streets and the very gutters, but must keep its hold on the skies. If it loses its hold on the skies it can never lift men from the streets and gutters. If religion itself becomes irreverent, how can it teach men reverence, which is the soul of religion? If religion loses its own soul, how can it save the souls of men? What shall it profit religion if it gain the whole world and lose its own soul?

God is our Heavenly Father; we cannot make too much of this blessed truth or hold it too dear. I will go beyond this evangelist in presenting this truth to men. He says, "I have no use for the damnable doctrine that all men are the children of God." Well, I have. My message to every soul of man is, you are God's child, a sinful, rebellious, wandering, lost child it may be, but still a child. Rise up and live as a child of God. My message to every man is, God loves you even in your sin, and in the greatness of His love gave His Son to die for you while yet in your sins. You must love Him because He first loved you, and come back to Him who has never ceased to love and long and seek for you. He calls this "new stuff belched forth from Hell." Nevertheless it is my message. But we must remember that God is not only our Heavenly Father, but also the great Creator, ruler, governor of the universe. "The heavens declare His glory and the firmament sheweth His handiwork." The Bible never for one moment permits us to forget the supreme majesty, the ineffable dignity, the effulgent glory of God. "My thoughts are not your thoughts nor My ways your ways, saith the Lord, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts." "Great is the Lord and greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence

of all them that are about Him." "Holy and reverend is His name." "For thus saith the high and holy One that inhabited eternity, whose name is holy." "They have profaned My holy name." "I will be jealous for My holy name." "I will sanctify My great name which ye have profaned."

Is it reverent to treat God, to speak to God as one does to the man in the street? Because you say to the first man you meet, "Good morning, how do you do?" Is it reverent to say, "Good morning, God, how do you do?" Because you give to a man or woman of more or less distinction the Chautauqua salute, is it reverent to wave your silly handkerchief to God? Because you use slang with the man in the street, is it reverent to use slang to God? To say, "God, do you get me;" "God, you must be stuck on this fine body of ministers;" "God, it must make you crazy to see so many converted to you?" To ring an imaginary telephone and say, "Hello, God this is ———." Is it reverent in the midst of prayer to Almighty God to burst into a laugh and to say to the devil, "Ha, ha, old man, you're up against is now," and to take the attitude of a prize fighter and spar with an imaginary devil, and all in the name of prayer? I say that is not prayer but buffoonery in the name of prayer.

The Lord Jesus Christ is our friend and brother. He has come down from the mansions of glory into

the conditions of our manhood, that He may lift us to His glory; but He is the Son of God, very God of very God, the King of Glory, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Is it right or reverent to rob Him of His majesty and glory by common, coarse familiarity? If I had the honor to count among my friends the King of England, would it not be insufferable vulgarity to call him George, and to go about speaking of him as George? What then can we say of such prayers, "Say, Jesus, I'd a had cold feet coming to Pittsburgh if it hadn't been for You." "Say, Jesus, I'll bet 99 out of 100 of the men here believe in You." "Say, Jesus, the worst things that have been said about me have been said by fellows that call themselves preachers." "Well, Jesus, I was in a sick home yesterday. The lady said she hadn't time to read my sermon but the nurse read it to her every day. Thousands all over the world are reading the sermons published in the Pittsburgh papers." That is not prayer; that is advertising. The Master does not teach us to speak this way. He says: "Ye call Me Master and Lord and ye say well, for so I am." No one in the Bible speaks that way to Christ Jesus or about Him except His enemies, even the devils do not dare to speak so. St. Mark tells us that the unclean spirit in the man cried out saying, "I know Thee who Thou art the Holy One of God." The beautiful parable of the

prodigal son, the most exquisite picture that the world has of God's relation to men, does it gain or lose even for the man in the street, to turn it into slang and make it ridiculous. "The son said, 'Come, divvy up, I'm tired of this, pass over the mazuma, see?'" and the father tumbled to it, and said, 'I get you.' " The beauty is gone and this precious part of the Bible he would take from us. Does it help men to reverence God, to describe Him as coming in judgment, going from the garret to the kitchen, and then in his dramatic presentation of God the speaker goes down on all fours, snoops under the pulpit, says, "Hello, what's this? A pack of cards? Throw it into the dump. What's this in the ice box? Beer? Throw it into the sewer. What's this handkerchief in the cupboard, and a woman says, "It's my ball costume," and then there is a laugh. Does it increase our respect for Christ to say, "This is the way that Jesus Christ preached. You lobsters, you four-flushers, you false-alarms, you excess baggage, you are a bunch of guys, and the whole bunch of you ought to be in jail. That is the way Jesus preached, and you preachers can learn a lesson to preach as He did." I say that is a slander and libel on the truest gentleman that ever trod this earth, and I wonder that no Christians in loyalty to their Master with bowed and shamed face, got up and left the place. Probably they would have been insulted if they had, for

two elderly ladies from Edgewood did so, and he called out, "Is there a cow-boy here; I wish he would lasso those two old heifers" (So reported). Was there no gentleman there to resent an insult to two defenseless ladies, which no gentleman would have offered to the lowest woman of the streets? I turn to my dictionary to the word sacrilege, and find one of its definitions, "the making sacred things common." I turned to the word profanity, and find, "especially treating sacred things with irreverence or undue familiarity." If these definitions are correct, I say that this is more than vulgarity, it is sacrilege and profanity.

But some one says, this is a poor, rough, ignorant man; he does not know any better; we must not judge him as we do others; it is natural for him to speak this way, and he cannot help it. No, no. I can imagine an ignorant, degraded man offering a prayer to God every word of which might be slang and sound irreverent to us, and yet sound sweet to God, because it is the best that he knows. But this is not an ignorant man; he may be self-educated, but he is educated. He can use as good English as any one when he wants to. In the houses of the rich he is as refined as any one. He has some knowledge of history, of the Scriptures, of theology, although his theology is what used to be called Hell-fire theology. He speaks this way simply for effect;

it is effect, carefully calculated and studied, repeated in city after city. He speaks this way because it is what the crowd likes. Much that he says is good, helpful, true, impressive. He can preach a good sermon without a word that is objectionable when he wants to; it is a pity that so much of it is vitiated and spoiled by irreverence and vulgarity. The result, I fear, will be to drag religion down, rather than lift men up. No doubt there will be less drinking, and that is good, but will there be more "pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father?" Religion, real religion, is a sane, beautiful, tender, reverent, glorious, divine thing, with music and art and worship and faith and hope and love and duty and self sacrifice and all that is highest, noblest, best for time and eternity, a thing of the skies come down to earth, and it is a shame, a sad shame, to degrade and soil and mar it by coarseness, vulgarity, indecency and profanity.

Another thing. In almost every sermon there is a sneer, a scathing criticism, a caricature of the Church. Speaking of the Scribes and Pharisees in the time of Christ, with half a dozen of his favorite epithets, he says, "The same old gang are running the Church today, and running it into Hell." "Any minister who preaches faithfully would be put out of the pulpit." "The bars of the Church are so low that any old hog with two suits of clothes and a

bank roll can get into it." "I have lent money to all sorts of people, but the only ones who beat me out of it are church members." If he means, and that is what his words do mean, that a man of known immorality would be received into any church in this city because of his wealth, except as a penitent sinner, he says what is not true and he knows it is not true. If he means, and that is what his words do mean, that the standard of honesty is lower in the Church than outside the Church, he says what is not true and he knows it is not true. The Church has its faults and its weaknesses, it is open to just criticism, many of its members are far from what they ought to be; if he would get church members by themselves and kindly and without exaggeration tell them their faults and show them what they ought to be, he would do a great, good, much-needed thing. But to hold the Church up to public contempt and ridicule because it pleases the man in the street, who is only too delighted to hear such things about the Church, that is another thing.

This is more than a mere matter of taste; it is a question of ethics, of right and wrong. If I could crowd this church to suffocation, and partly with people who do not go to church, and do some of them good, would it be right for me in my preaching to get down on all fours, to throw myself on my face, to slide up and down the banisters, to perform

what even the favoring press calls "pulpit acrobatics, and monkeyish tricks, reminding one of the zoo?" Would it be right for me to bring into the pulpit the language of the bar room, the coarsest slang of the streets, the vociferation of a fish wife, and the exaggeration of the yellowest journalism? Would it be right to speak to Almighty God in prayer as if He were my equal, and the Lord Jesus Christ my boon companion; to use prayer as a means of flattery to those who agree with me and of insult to those who differ, and of self-advertisement; to put into the mouth of the Saviour language that no man wants his children to hear, much less to use? Would it be right for me to do this for the sake of attracting the crowd, because the crowd likes to hear and see such things and will always go where they can see and hear them? Then if not right for me in the name of religion and as a minister of religion to do and say such things, it is not right for another in the name of religion and as a minister of religion to do and say them. If it is right for him it is right for others, and we grant the principle that it is right to do and say anything however irreverent and vulgar to get the crowd, that the end justifies the means? What will be the effect if the other ministers, who sit at his feet, go back to their churches to follow his example; and the people, who desert their

churches on Sunday to hear him, come back to them with an increased appetite for that kind of preaching? More than twenty ministers have had to leave their churches in places where this work has been done. Its great success will have an effect not only on the evangelistic work and revival methods, but on the preaching of the future. Men who are ambitious for success, men who are preaching to poor, struggling, half-empty churches, will be tempted to say, "If that is what people want, why not give it to them?" and the imitation will be worse than the original. For eighteen centuries the Christian religion has maintained itself in the world by keeping free from such things. The combination of religion and irreverence, the preacher and the mountebank, the Gospel and slang, the Church and vaudeville, is a new and dangerous one, and no one can tell to what it may lead. Those who look only on the immediate results, many of which are good, see the matter in one way. Those who with larger vision look beyond the present moment and the immediate results see it in another way, and both are earnest and sincere in their opinion, and have the same right to say what they think. What right have people to bombard me with painful letters, to say that they are "Sad and grieved that I have parted from good people," "I am a highbrow, behind the times, unable to move as the world moves," an "old

woman," that they are praying for me, that I may be "forgiven for being so puffed up and may have a vision of the true God," "that God will bless me among the bar-keepers, gamblers and prostitutes," because with such light as I have, I say what I think it is my duty to say ; any more than I have the right to inflict painful letters and insulting prayers on those who differ from me.

How different, how utterly different, were the methods of Him who knew human nature and its needs as no one ever knew it, who spake as never man spake, whom the common people heard gladly. Simple, plain, homely, practical, so that the most ignorant could understand, touching all human life from the lowest to the highest, drawing his illustrations from the most commonplace things, the leaven in the meal, the sweeping of the house, the grinding on the housetop, the plowing, sowing, reaping of the fields, the grass, the flowers, the birds, the children at their games, the fisherman with his nets, the merchant with his merchandise, the banker with his money, but never, never irreverent, trivial, coarse, vulgar. He who came from God, and who knew God as the Son knows the Father, never speaks of God with familiarity, but always with reverence, and His prayers always breathe the spirit of tender reverence. "Holy Father, keep through Thine own name those whom Thou hast given me," "O right-

eous Father, the world has not known Thee," "Abba, Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me." So He teaches us to pray, "When ye pray, say, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." He would not lower His standard a hair's breadth even to save the world. This was the meaning of His great temptation on the mountain top, which, of course, is to be taken figuratively, not literally, to come down to the world's level, to use the world's methods and forces to save the world. His answer then and for all time was, "Get thee behind me, Satan." So with the Apostles and those who followed them, who "turned the world upside down," plain, uncultivated men, but never irreverent or undignified. So with those who have done the greatest work in the world—Francis of Assisi—Brother Francis, giving up a fortune and going without a dollar, living among the poor as the poorest lived, with his heart full of tenderness for the poor, the greatest reformer of the middle ages, who changed the face of Europe for centuries, but with what exquisite reverence and simplicity. Next to him I would perhaps put the Wesleys, who wrought the greatest reformation in England and lifted the character of spiritual life to a higher level, with thousands and tens of thousands of rough colliers and miners and working people of all classes hanging on their lips, swayed by their words, following them

to better things, but never speaking the language of the slums to reach the slums, or commending religion to the vulgar by vulgarity. Next to them I would perhaps put Moody, as the man who did the greatest amount of good in the last century. I have sat night after night under his preaching, crowding the largest buildings in New York and Philadelphia to their utmost with all classes of men and women, leading thousands into a better life, always plain, simple, homely, but never irreverent or coarse. I have listened every evening for a month to the preaching of another evangelist, with the largest building in the city filled always to overflowing, and after he had gone I saw the aisles of my church, as large a church as this, packed to the doors with men and women waiting to be received into the Church, and over a hundred to be baptised, but I never heard a word from his lips to criticise or object to. I believe in revivals of religion, but not in irreverence in religion. I do not believe that the Gospel, "which is the power of God unto salvation," needs such help as this for the conversion of the world, or that the Holy Spirit of God needs to use such means for the salvation of men. The whole history of the most successful and enduring religious work of the past is against it. It is not true and the whole history of the past shows that it is not true, that the most ignorant and degraded

need coarseness, irreverence, vulgarity to draw them under the influence of the Gospel. Wherever there is real spiritual power these methods are not needed, and in the end only defeat the purpose of the work. With the purpose I am in fullest sympathy. I say God bless it and prosper it. God bless the man and make him truly great; but in loyalty to my religion and my Church I must protest, though with fear and trembling and my knees shaking under me, for I know that what I say will be misunderstood and misrepresented, yet I must protest against some of the methods and expressions as shocking, sacrilegious and subversive of religion; for if no one protest, if Christian people, to whom such things are abhorrent, have not the courage to say so, and nothing is heard but hurrahs, and hallelujahs, which are turning the man's head and making him monumental in his conceit and arrogance, what is to hinder him, and others who come after him, from becoming more outrageous, sacrilegious, indecent and profane, until religion is dragged down to the level of the street and trodden down in the mire, and men say, if this is religion we will live and die without it. I am thankful that I belong to a Church which stands, as it has stood for centuries, for a different idea and type of religion, sane, beautiful, dignified, reverent, a Church that reaches all classes, the rich, the well-to-do, the poor

and the very poor, that such preaching and prayers can never be heard in its pulpit and sanctuary, and before they are I trust that this beautiful building will have crumbled to the dust.

Note—This sermon is printed against my wish and judgment because of the almost universal desire of my people and many others to have it. May it do good and not harm.